20 Seconds and a Sacrifice of Soap: Ritual in the time of COVID-19

By Andrew Barwick

As I stood at my wash basin in April of 2020, scrubbing my hands and singing 'Happy Birthday' to myself, which had now become my practice as soon as I enter my house, I looked down at my hands and the soap and water running over them reminded me of a similar image, seen in paintings: that of blood being sprinkled over the altar at the Jewish temple, as described in the Biblical book of Leviticus (Lev. 16:19 [NIV]). The connection is, perhaps, not as morbid, nor as farfetched, as it would first appear. I was not thinking of death, but rather of purification; about the cleansing properties of sacrificial blood, the Jewish example being the most familiar to me. The more I thought about this connection, the more I was able to answer the questions that the ever-present Anthropologist within me had been asking. What place did handwashing, by this point a mainstay of attempts to control the virus, have in my mind? What was its function? And why did I feel stressed if I didn't wash my hands for the full recommended 20 seconds? With this comparison in mind, I realised how handwashing had become a ritual, a way to police the boarders between hygienic and contagious that had been drawn between my clean house, and the unknown but dangerous outside.

To understand the role that handwashing played in the thinking of many people during the lockdown, we must first understand the anthropological concepts of ritual and sacrifice. There is a long anthropological tradition of ritual and religious thinking. One of the earliest proponents of this tradition, Emile Durkheim, set up the key mode of understanding that influenced much anthropological thought, including my own theorising about handwashing. What Durkheim calls 'the distinctive trait of religious thought' is 'the division of the world into two domains', which Durkheim terms 'profane and sacred', and the classification of all things into one of these domains (Durkheim 2005: 34). These two domains exist, according to Durkheim, in 'absolute heterogeneity' (ibid.: 36), meaning that everything is either sacred or profane, nothing can be both sacred and profane and, in theory, never the twain shall meet. In this way, the categories of sacred and profane function as ontologies, or modes of being in the world,

when attached to an object. One can say of an object, person or thing: "that is sacred". As soon as these ontologies become established and these concepts become represented in the material world, however, there is now a danger of the two categories coming into contact. Indeed, as soon as an object is defined as sacred, it must be in opposition to that which is profane: the non-sacred world around it. Mary Douglas explores this problem in her book Purity and Danger (1966), where, speaking of sacred objects, they say 'it is their nature always to be in danger of losing their distinctive and necessary character', in other words, their sacredness (ibid.: 27). As a result, 'the sacred needs to be continually hedged in with prohibitions' (ibid.: 27), and these prohibitions and protections take the form of restrictions and rituals. In our Israelite example, their deity was the epitome of purity (Lev. 19:2 [NIV]) and the tabernacle and later temple was their dwelling place (Exod. 25:8 [NIV]). As a result, 'rules of pollution and purity also drew strict boundaries around the altar' (Barton & Muddiman 2001: 94).

The problem then follows of how to change the ontology of a specific object or person, or, in other words, how to make a profane thing sacred. What is required here is what Douglas calls a 'rite of purification' (1966: 171), a symbolic act that allows one to pass through the barrier that separates profane and sacred and to change one's ontology. One such symbolic act is the Jewish sacrifice that we are taking as an exemplar. Sacrifice can be seen as 'the most important act of the Jewish religion' (Douglas 1966: 61), precisely because it was used to maintain the boundaries of the sacred and profane, in particular the sacrifices for atonement of sin. The most important of these, the day of atonement ritual (Lev. 16 [NIV]), was used to remove any of the profanity of Israel from the Altar (Lev.16:19 [NIV]) and from the whole nation of Israel (Lev. 16:30 [NIV]) and thus change the ontology of the nation, from one of profanity to one of sacredness. In both of these instances, blood is used as a means of cleansing; this is the sacrificial element of the ritual. The sacrificial ritual involves the usage of something of symbolic importance for cleansing, in this case blood, which takes on the profanity from the profane object or person and is then destroyed or discarded with the profanity, leaving the subject of the ritual in a state of sacredness. In this way, the blood serves an 'apotropaic function' (Barton & Muddiman 2001: 96), that is, the expenditure of blood serves to ward off danger through the removal of the profane. Thus, the day of atonement ritual can be seen as an archetypal ritual, governed by exten

sive regulations detailed in Leviticus and involving an element of sacrificial cleansing. Using this example and anthropological theory, we have established an understanding of rituals and sacrifice within a system of religious thought that divides the world into sacred and profane .

But what has this got to do with washing hands? Handwashing, while far removed in most people's mind from religious sacrifices, have many of the same ritualistic elements that have only strengthened in recent times, as it too has become a method to ward off existential danger from an unseen, yet very real and present threat. Firstly, I will explain some of my context in writing this, and the meaning that handwashing has taken on during the COVID-19 lockdown. I will then compare it to the Jewish sacrifice, which I admit is an extreme but effective example of a religious rite, to see how handwashing can be understood as a symbolic act to shed light on religious thinking during the lockdown.

One of the earliest pieces of advice given by the UK government, the NHS, and the CDC during the COVID-19 outbreak was 'Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds' (CDC 2020), by all accounts perfectly good advice to help reduce the spread of the Coronavirus. This piece of advice, because of its clarity and the frequency with which it was repeated, became one of the main and most widespread "rules" of the lockdown era. Social media and the news were full of different recommendations of handwashing songs, such as Toto's 'Africa', and Lizzo's 'Truth Hurts,' from the Daily Mail (Kekatos & Brantley 2020), or 'Happy Birthday' sung twice (NHS 2020). We were told to wash our hands after "being in a public place" (which at that point effectively meant going outside) and "before touching [our] eyes, nose, or mouth" (CDC, 2020). As a result, I, and many others, became strict in our practice. When outside, we would not touch our face and, as soon as we entered the house, we would wash our hands. What stood out to me is the way this advice was taken by the people around me and how strongly it impacted me, not just in terms of my routine, but in terms of the way I understood myself and my body. While outside I considered myself to be both in danger and dangerous, at risk of exposure to the virus and at risk of exposing others. As soon as I was inside and had washed my hands, these thoughts disappeared, and I felt able to touch my face without any fear. But why? A part of my brain understood that a 20 second handwash did not serve as a guarantee of safety, as the virus could still be on my hands despite washing, further up my arms, or even on my clothes. In addition, 20 seconds was not some 'perfect' number. There are all sorts of handwashing

variables such as amount of soap, heat of water, and scrubbing technique, all of which could affect the cleanliness of my hands. Despite this, 20 seconds became the law in my thinking; before washing my hands, or after washing for any less time and I still might be unclean, but after 20 seconds, I was safe. This was evidenced when I was interrupted before finishing my full 20 second wash. I felt unclean until I did a full wash again. What I noticed most strongly was the way that this danger was located in my hands, far above any other part of my body.

In just my brief description and autoethnographic account, there are several comparisons that can easily be drawn out. Firstly, one can see this religious thinking at work, although instead of sacred and profane, I was thinking in terms of safe and dangerous, or clean and unclean. I separated the world in my mind into two separate domains: the unclean outside where an invisible danger could be lying on any surface, and the clean inside, where I was safe from the coronavirus. In addition, this binary applied to various objects as well; newly delivered post was unclean until it was sprayed with disinfectant and my healthy body was a clean object that needed to be protected. With this binary came the expected restrictions designed to police the border between my clean body and the unclean world around it. These included physical distancing to ensure that I did not come into contact with any potentially unclean other people, and restrictions of contact, for example not touching my face while I was outside. Of particular note to me was the way that I conceived my hands in relation to this ontology of binaries. The focus of the media and health advisory bodies on the hands, through these handwashing campaigns, influenced how I thought about them. My hands functioned as a separate object from my body, able to occupy a different ontology to the rest of my body. While outside, for example, my hands were in a state of uncleanliness and as such were restricted from contacting my clean eyes and mouth. They were the point of contact between the unclean world and my clean body, in almost the same way that the Jewish priest was the mediator between the sacred and the profane. As a result, they passed between the barrier and occupy either category often, at least twice a day when I took my government approved walk. It is no surprise then, that the most important ritual cleansing targeted my hands.

The instructions for the ritual of handwashing were clearly and plainly set out in my mind by the CDC: 20 seconds, soap and warm water. These were the regulations for the proper conducting of the rite that allowed

my hands to cross the ontological boundary and become clean. Within this ritual, the soap acted in the same apotropaic way as the blood did for the Israelites: it was the agent of cleansing which, through being sacrificed and consumed, took on the uncleanliness of my hands and rendered them clean. In this way, the act of handwashing functioned not only to remove dirt and potentially viruses from my hands, it also functioned as a symbolic ritual, allowing me to reconfigure my understanding of my hands as safe. When understanding handwashing as a ritual with a sacrificial element, it becomes more understandable why I was so concerned with completing the 20 seconds of my wash. While one second of difference may not have had a major impact on the biomedical cleanliness of my hands, failure to properly conduct the ritual had prevented my hands from moving over from the world of the unclean to the world of the clean.

Through comparison with Jewish sacrificial rituals in the Old Testament, and using anthropological understanding of sacrifice and ritual, I have explored the idea that during the COVID-19 lockdown, handwashing has become a ritual practice. Modes of religious thinking function to divide the world into two categories, the clean and unclean. Because hands are the primary mode of contact between the clean healthy body and the unclean world, they regularly become contaminated by uncleanliness and, as a result, handwashing became a central ritual of cleansing, by means of strict instructions and a sacrifice of soap, in order to return them to their clean state. This should not be taken to mean that handwashing is a merely symbolic act that has no health implications. Instead, what I am aiming to do is to highlight how people during lockdown might understand and conceive of handwashing and its significance.

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